

Tribute to Dr. Vinod Raina – Arvind Gupta

I first met Vinod and you too in 1978 in Hoshangabad during the big teacher training programme. The HSTP was being expanded to all the middle schools of Hoshangabad. I was on a year's leave from Telco and was not at all sure what I would do later. But the HSTP inspired me – it was for ordinary teachers and tried to use ordinary materials to make science fun for children. The very ordinariness of it all made it so extraordinary.

Then after 3 years of working with a Trade Union in Dalli Rajhara I returned in 1984 back to Pune. Prof. Yashpal – as Secretary DST gave me a fellowship to write my first book on science activities. The proposal was for printing 2,000 copies but Prof. Yashpal insisted the first printing order to be 25,000 copies. The fellowship had to be routed through a registered organization as the grant could not be given to an individual. Eklavya has just been founded and Vinod very willingly offered to channelize this grant through Eklavya. Despite criticism within Eklavya he stood firm and this is how KHEL-KHEL MEIN (later translated in a dozen languages) came out.

Later I got to work with Vinod for a longer period as part of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) - a relationship which I have deeply cherished. The BGVS apart from other things brought out low-cost, good books for children in Hindi. In 1997 I was invited by KK and Vinod to do a “series” of books for children. So, I searched and translated two books - THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES by Jean Giono and THE GIVING TREE by Shel Silverstein.

Then came 1998 - when the BJP government did a Nuclear Blast at Pokharan. Scientists cheered, people hailed it as a great leap forward. I wept. I thought, “Instead of making bombs couldn't Indian scientists find better ways of feeding, clothing and housing our people?” A deep aversion for war welled up within me. I started searching for books on peace but couldn't find any. I searched here, there, everywhere and could only find jingoistic literature – poems, stories extolling war, urging to kill the enemy. This made me very sad. Not one anti-war book in the land of Buddha and Gandhi! Something was terribly amiss. Then I came across a book – SADAKO AND THE THOUSAND CRANES. This is the true story of a little Japanese girl who succumbed to the atom-bomb disease for no fault of hers. If you were told that half a million people perished in Hiroshima and Nagasaki you might not bat an eyelid. But this poignant story of a little girl will certainly bring tears to your eyes.

Later the BGVS brought out several other anti-nuke books - THE FIRE OF HIROSHIMA, SHIN'S TRICYCLE and FAITHFUL ELEPHANTS all true stories. FAITHFUL ELEPHANTS the poignant story of how three elephants were starved to death is now in its 70th edition in Japan! This story showed how war devastates and degrades not only human beings but also animals!

Slowly, the repertoire increased and the BGVS published some of the best peace stories from around the world. For instance, THE STORY OF FERDINAND. Munro Leaf wrote this immortal tale of 800 words in less than an hour. First published in 1936 this

anti-war book sparked immediate controversy. Political critics charged it as a satirical attack on aggression. Hitler ordered the book burned while fellow dictator Stalin granted it privileged status as the only non-communist children's book allowed in Poland. Few people know that this book was very close to Gandhi's heart. He even called it his favorite book. This is an immortal story of the passive resistance of a peaceful bull!

So, starting with just two books we ended up with over a hundred. These books covered a wide canvas – anti-nuke, anti-war, peace, education, environment, books for “special” children, and some of the best children's books from across the world. Forty of these books were printed in a bilingual - Hindi / English format and they got a thumping response. In today's world – English is the language of opportunity. A bilingual book makes the second language more comprehensible to children. This series of a hundred books named - the *Balvachan Series* has now sold over a million copies.

Because of the dearth of such libertarian children's literature most of these books have been translated in Telugu, Marathi and Gujarati.

For all this I owe a deep debt to two dear friends – Dr. Vinod Raina and K. K. Krishnakumar who gave me a free hand. They never asked any stupid questions and never wasted time holding meetings. Around the year 2000, after strenuous efforts I got permission to translate and publish the iconic book SUMMERHILL by A. S. Neill in Hindi. Vinod made available Rs 20,000/- for the translation of this educational classic which was subsequently published in Hindi by Eklavya.

More than anyone else perhaps Vinod realized the harsh and stony educational terrain in our country. There is very little soil to nurture young minds. Even if there was a good seed it would wilt away for lack of nourishment. Vinod worked all his life to “create the soil” whether it was through the HSTP, Eklavya, BGVS or the RTE. We must continue his good work to create a “fistful of soil” and to sow seeds of peace.